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White Teeth, Sibling Rivalries and Zeno's Paradox

Jules Goldner

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This year, in a special segment for the *Review*, we held a contest among local high schools to see if we could find a paper of such high quality it merited us turning our frowns upon. Turns out, there was one. And this is it. Congrats, Jules.



***White Teeth, Sibling Rivalries,
and Zeno's Paradox***

Jules Goldner
Moravian Academy

We live in a world where the tangible is believed—if you can touch it, it's real. We use our senses to differentiate between objects by weight, size, and texture; even if two objects are physically equivalent, they are still separate entities divided by space. Every object can be seen as singular, existing apart from the rest: *multiplicity, many*. When we look below the surface, however, on a molecular level, every single thing is made of the same, essential components—the building blocks of matter, the basic structures of all physical things are identical, every object is simply a different arrangement of protons, neutrons, and electrons. In effect, the world is a ubiquitous, continuous mass of subatomic particles: *singularity, one*. Yet, how can everything be separate and together simultaneously? In *White Teeth*, author Zadie Smith explores this idea, known as “Zeno's paradox,” in relation to the people, beliefs, and relationships that inhabit her novel.

Zeno's “angle,” as Smith puts it, deals with the paradox of reality as both a single entity and a collection of parts by recognizing that before acknowledging the oneness of the world, one must “first establish multiplicity... as an illusion” (384). It sounds deceptively simple, but recognizing all differing facets of the world and finding a continuum of oneness that they share can prove to be impossibly difficult. Even establishing the nonexistence of multiplicity on a limited level, say between two people, and finding a singular

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connection between them can be extremely challenging and ultimately unsuccessful. Smith addresses the inherent difficulty of this situation when discussing the relationship between Magid and Millat Iqbal, a set of Bangladeshi twins who are separated as young children by their father, Samad.

The Iqbal brothers are two physically identical males who grow up in completely different environments, (Magid in Bangladesh and Millat in London) and develop into two completely different people. To over-generalize, Magid becomes an intellectual gentleman who has strayed from his native religion, Islam, and instead idolizes Marcus Chalfen, an established geneticist who has worked to 'play God' by genetically altering a rodent. Millat, meanwhile, becomes a mischievous belligerent who has deeply infused himself in KEVIN, a violent Muslim fundamentalist group that wholly opposes Chalfen's genetic studies. These dissenting personalities clash violently upon meeting in person for the first time in years.

According to Zeno, these twins, as with everything else in the world, are really one. Their beings should melt and mesh together once their differences are established as fantasy. In reality, however, when the twins meet and attempt to reconcile their sour relationship, their diametrical opinions prove to be just too much. From first sight, Millat cannot, or perhaps will not, even recognize his and his twin's physical similarities. Millat is astounded at Magid's unfamiliar "line of the jaw...eyes... [and] hair" (382). When the twin brothers talk, they cannot get past their religious disagreements, their varying beliefs, or their discordant individual experiences. The neutral room in which they meet transforms as they "cover the room with history-- past, present, and future," and excitedly argue about "every debated principle [possible]" (383). The twins bludgeon, rationalize and analyze for hours,

only to find that they have made no progress. Magid and Millat spend their time not really listening, trying instead to make one another see the other's way, thus becoming "trapped in the temporal instant" (384). Each brother establishes so firmly his point of view that he leaves no room for discussion, for reasoning, or for contemplation. Eventually the Iqbal brothers find themselves stuck in the exact same place that they started because they are so stubbornly unwilling to compromise. Ironically, the harder they fight for each other to see the 'correct' opinion, to agree and give in, the more "nothing changes" for Magid and Millat and the more they find themselves "running at a standstill" (384).

Despite Zeno's assertion that the world is one and that multiplicity is an illusion, the Iqbal brothers cannot manage to see the inconsequential nature of their arguments, and instead leave the "neutral room as they had entered it: weighed down, burdened, unable to waver from their [respective courses]" (384). It seems their increasingly eloquent persistence to "divide reality inexhaustibly into parts" and articulate their perceptions with endless words tirelessly distances themselves from Zeno's peaceful singularity (384).

In spite of the obvious, clashing differences between the brothers, many other arrows in the novel point to the existence of a oneness between Magid and Millat. To start, the fact that the brothers are identical twins signals a deep, prevailing connection that they have shared since birth. Coincidentally (or not), they both break their noses, resulting in the same crook in the nose and in a continuation of their mirrored appearances. Both names, beginning in "M," lend themselves to alliteration and to a subconscious inclination to somehow link the two men.

Even deeper than looks or titles, both Magid and Millat share similarities in personality and beliefs that lie beneath the

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surface. Perversely, these parallels in character seem to lie at the heart of their most vehement conflicts. Both brothers, although set on two very different “dangerous trajectories,” find themselves having taken undoubtedly extreme paths in life. Magid is involved as a pioneer and supporter of the radical scientific frontier, while Millat is embroiled as a leader of a radical religious group. The brothers’ specific interests immediately clash, but the fact that they both have found positions so drastic and defined signals a connection. They are both of the same mind to seek such extremity and take such a rooted, unmoving stance in their respective beliefs. This personality trait, this revolutionary tendency, ties the twins together in a distinct way and reveals a “flowing oneness” between them.

In addition to their tendency towards radicalism, Magid and Millat, sadly, also share the disapproval of their father, Samad. Samad, an Islamic Bangladeshi immigrant, always dreamed that his two boys would retain their Bangladeshi culture and stay true to their Muslim roots. Despite Samad’s multiple attempts to cultivate these characteristics in Magid and Millat, however, the brothers disregard their father’s dreams and take their own cultural and spiritual courses. Samad sends Magid back to live in Bangladesh as a young child, hoping that he will learn to be a pure holy man. Instead, Samad’s plan to produce a devout Muslim backfires, and Magid becomes a “distinguished-looking young man” (239) who seems to turn his back on the Muslim acceptance of and submission to the Islamic God. Millat, on the other hand, becomes involved with radical Islam, joining a notably violent Muslim group that accepts God but insists that “religion [is]

not one based on faith"¹⁷ (367). Magid's academic conquests and Millat's divergent religious convictions are equally painful for Samad, who only longs for two truly Muslim children.

Although the twins' similar proclivity toward pursuing the 'extreme' is meaningful, perhaps the most significant trait that these two brothers share is their attachment to the past. Heavily influenced by their father, Samad, Millat and Magid both find themselves unable to "escape their history any more than [one]... can lose [one's] shadow" (385). Samad, who chronically fears the loss of his culture in the folds of his overwhelmingly English environment, passes on his obsession to preserve one's history for better or for worse to his two sons. Magid and Millat carry their experiences around with them as constant reminders of their family, their dissonant relationship with each other, and their sore differences. The twin brothers frantically and articulately "express their past[s], [those places] they have just been" to ensure their preservation (385).

The personalities of the Iqbal brothers are black and white in detail and in practice, but they have similarities which are far more fundamental than any scientific or religious belief. Whether it is due to their upbringing, their family, or their environments, Magid and Millat have both chosen to experience the world radically and remember the past with incorrigible resolve. Although their "genes... have reached different conclusions," the personalities of Magid and Millat Iqbal *do* accomplish Zeno's paradox (382). The multiplicity of their opinions and characteristics can be traced back to their roots and inherent tendencies, where oneness

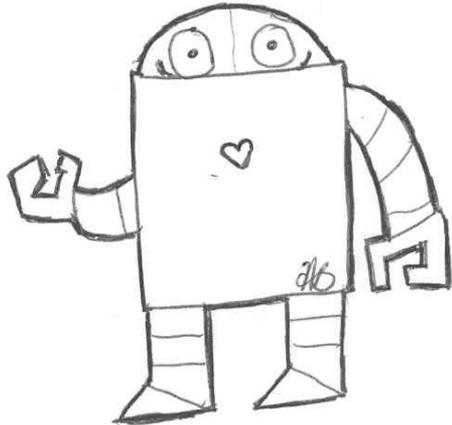
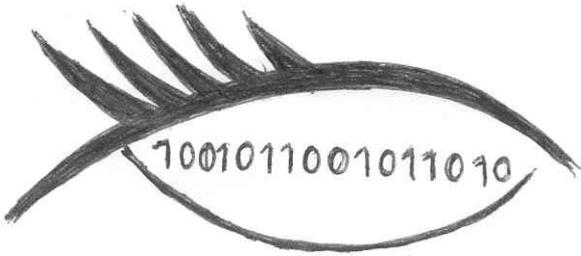
¹⁷ KEVIN preaches that its Muslim tradition "could be intellectually proved by the best minds" (367); they believe there is no blind uncertainty involved.

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flowed long before complex discord fiercely split the brothers apart.

Works Cited

Smith, Zadie. *White Teeth*. Vintage: New York, 2000



Hayley Bonsteel